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JUSTICE FOR AAG SANSONETTI

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SUBJECT: 'I AM NOT A TROUBLEMAKER': COM MEETS NEW SLOVENIAN ENVIRONMENT MINISTER JANEZ PODOBNIK

REF: 04 LJUBLJANA 884

¶11. Summary: In a January 24 courtesy call, new Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning, Janez Podobnik told COM about his plans for the Ministry, highlighting challenges of nuclear waste disposal and biotech. He also stated that there might be opportunities for US investors as Slovenia plans for a waste disposal incinerator and seeks to build wind-powered electrical plants. In addition to environmental matters, the discussion covered some political ground since Podobnik is also president of coalition partner Slovene People's Party (SLS). Podobnik noted that while the coalition was operating smoothly, it was difficult to be in "third place" (ie. the third party in a four party coalition). On the subject of relations with Croatia, Podobnik, referring to his late-September 2004 arrest by Croatian police in a contested border region stated "I am not a troublemaker." Podobnik hopes and expects that the dispute and pending charges will be resolved in a diplomatic fashion. End Summary.

Ministry's Main Priorities

¶12. COM, accompanied by DCM, Econ Off, and Econ/Comm FSN, began the meeting asking Podobnik for his main priorities for the Ministry. Podobnik replied that he would focus on the three areas corresponding to the focus areas of the Ministry: environment, spatial planning, and housing. On the environment, Podobnik said that his priority is to identify a location for an incinerator for the dual purpose of waste disposal and energy creation. In addition, Podobnik said he will focus on preserving and maintaining the potable water supply since it represents a strategic resource in Slovenia. On spatial planning, Podobnik said he will strive to decrease potential barriers to foreign investors in areas where he has influence such as the location of infrastructure, including railroads, highways, and gas lines. COM told Podobnik that the Ministry and the GoS should do everything they can to increase the speed and the transparency of the processes foreign investors must go through to begin operations in Slovenia. On housing, Podobnik plans to increase the volume of construction of low-income housing.

Opportunities for US Investors

¶13. Noting Podobnik's comments on the incinerator, COM said that the U.S. is a global leader in the field of environmental technology and that we might be able to provide Slovenia with assistance in finding partners in this area. Podobnik welcomed U.S. participation in both the incinerator project and in the forthcoming (albeit temporarily delayed) wind energy project. Podobnik told COM that in March 2005, the Ministry will organize an incinerator seminar in Slovenia. He hopes to attract experts in the field, to hear success stories of best practices, and to attract potential investors. Podobnik noted that in spite of Slovenia's small size, a project of this nature would reach far beyond its borders, as green energy is gaining in importance in this region of the world.

Nuclear Waste

¶14. (Background: The waste disposal solution for Slovenia's only nuclear plant in Krsko, near the Croatian border, has yet to be resolved despite more than 20 years of discussions. Probably the largest environmental issue in Slovenia, nuclear waste has been stored at the facility site while the government searches for a more permanent solution. Unfortunately, one does not yet appear on the horizon.) When COM asked Podobnik about progress in finding a permanent solution for nuclear waste storage, Podobnik turned to Professor Dr. Marjan Vezjak, Director of the Office for International and European Affairs. Vezjak stated that Slovenia, as many other European countries, will try to solve this problem inside the EU. The goal of the Ministry is to identify at least one location for disposal of low and

medium radioactive waste and have a solution for this problem by 2008.

Wind Generated Power and Interest in AAG Sansoneti's Expertise

15. Podobnik told COM that he strongly supports "green" energy, and that this type of power is part of the government's coalition contract. The planned project of having a series of wind-operated power plants has stalled, however, due to the strong environmental concerns amongst the population and a negative environmental impact report from the Ministry's own environmental agency. Podobnik asked the COM for advice in solving this problem. COM replied that each case must be weighed on its own merits and that careful negotiations between the government, local authorities and NGOs could be key, with the understanding that compromises must often be made. Marko Starman, State Secretary at the Ministry, (and an SLS political appointee and longtime Embassy contact from his time in the Ministry of Justice handling denationalization issues), noted that the Ministry's goal will be to increase the transparency of this project and deal with the situation in a way that will avoid lawsuits. Starman expressed interest in cooperating with and getting advice from Assistant Attorney General for the Environment Thomas Sansonetti, with whom he met in November of 2004.

Biotech and GMOs

16. On biotechnology and GMOs, Podobnik stated that he believes Europe and, consequently, Slovenia, will form a balanced strategy. Podobnik is convinced that a good legal foundation is essential in dealing with this issue. As a medical doctor and politician, Podobnik believes that skepticism, precaution, and control are needed in this field. Noting that the biotech field lacks good practice in Slovenia as well as in the EU, Vezjak added that he believes the EU is leaning towards allowing GMOs in strictly determined limits only.

Political Agenda and Slovenian-Croatian Relations

17. Switching from environmental topics, COM asked Podobnik for his perception of how the SLS is faring in the new government. Podobnik who is new to the Government, but a well-known figure in Slovene politics, stated that the SLS started well in the new government. He also noted the SLS has very good connections with the municipalities as they rank number one among the parties in the number of city mayors. Podobnik rated Prime Minister Jansa an excellent leader and said his relationship with Jansa is good. Despite the positive feeling about the new government and the change in the political climate, Podobnik stated several times during the conversation that it is difficult being the number three coalition party member. (Note: After the October 2004 parliamentary elections, the SLS formed a coalition government with Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) led by PM Janez Jansa, the New Slovenia Party (NSi) led by Finance Minister Andrej Bajuk and the Slovenian Pensioners Party (DeSUS). End Note).

18. COM asked Podobnik for his perceptions of Slovenia's relations with Croatia. In contrast to his easy manner up to this point in the meeting, Podobnik stated somewhat stiffly that the incident prior to the recent elections [when he was arrested by Croatian authorities on the Slovenia-Croatia border in an area long understood to be in dispute] was addressed by the Croatians in a "non-European manner," since Podobnik was a member of EU parliament at the time of the incident. Noting he is not a "troublemaker," Podobnik suggested this incident will be resolved diplomatically. [Note. Most likely after a meeting between Justice Ministers in February. End Note] Podobnik said that he is committed to strengthening relations between Slovenia and Croatia as the two countries share the Sava and Donava rivers in addition to the Adriatic Sea. Because of this, Podobnik believes the two countries will have many good opportunities to cooperate closely in numerous environmental projects.

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